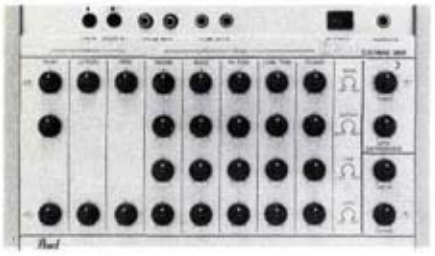
by Bob Saydlowski, Jr.

ELECTRONIC KITS- Part 1

The introduction of the Simmons *SDS5* back in 1981 started a new wave of sounds for drummers. The *SDS5* went a step beyond the early Synare and Syndrum "drum synthesizers" to create a drumkit's worth of sounds, to be set up and played like a normal kit. Since then, other companies have joined in, creating their own versions of the now-popular electronic drumkit. This special *Product Close-Up* looks at some of these manufacturers. Part 2, to follow in a future issue, will inspect even more new electronic kits.

Pearl Fightman



Pearl has stepped into the electronic drumkit field with the introduction of their *Fightman* setup. The basic *Fightman* is a blue-finish, five-piece kit, incorporating round, metal-shelled practice-type pads. The pads have regular pressed hoops, replaceable *Black Beat* heads, a soft rubber inner disc, and are drumkey-lensionable. Ten-inch pads are used for the snare and floor tom; eight-inch pads are used for the bass drum, hi tom and lo tom. Each pad has its own phono jack for cable connection; the bass drum has two (for double-bass pad connection). The bass drum pad screw-mounts onto a free-standing metal post, exactly like the one used with Pearl's *TD-5* practice pads (see *MD,* July '82). This post is braced at the back, and has a platform for pedal mounting, along with two sprung spurs at the bottom. A ribbed rubber stabilizing floor mat is also included.

The snare and floor tom pads have their own separate single-braced tripod stands with one adjustable tier and a right-angle ratchet tilter (somewhat of a modified 700 *Series* stand). The pads have threaded holes underneath, and mount onto the stand's tilter post. The same type of stand is used for the hi and lo toms, but this time, the stand has a metal adaptor bracket, which enables both pads to mount onto a single stand. The adaptor has flat C-slot arms on both ends. After the pads are mounted on with wing bolts underneath, the flat arms will move in the slot radius, bringing the pads closer to, or further from, each other. They are tiltable together, but not separately.

Electronic cymbals are also available for *the Fightman* kit: 14" hi-hats, plus 18" ride and crash. These cymbals are made of a hard yellow plastic, and are grooved like real cymbals. A rubber wedge is attached lo a section of their playing surfaces. (On the test unit, these pads kept coming unglued.) Underneath each cymbal is a small connector box with a phono jack lo accept the cable plug. The bottom hi-hat has a liny sensor at its edge which creates the electronic "chip" sound when the cymbals are closed with the foot pedal. 1 found one problem with the hi-hats: There is no hole for the lop hi-hat's cable lo pass through comfortably, and because of this, the cable gels squashed each lime the cymbals are closed. (Thankfully, the lop cymbal has a fell ring on its underside to cushion some of this.)

The *Fightman* control board is an AC-powered metal-cased box measuring 13 1/2" wide by 3 1/4" high by 8 1/2" deep, and weighs in at only seven pounds. Rotary knob controls are used for overall master volume, pad sensitiviiy, individual pad volumes, tuning (drums only), and sustain (drums and hi-hat). A control is also given for line input level. The *Fightman* also has a built-in electronic metronome with tempo and volume controls, along with an LED that flashes on the downbeat. The board has two 1/4" line-out jacks for stereo left and right; however, each jack can produce a mono signal. There are two line-in jacks (for mixing in records or tapes lo play along with), and a headphone jack, whose level is controlled by the master volume.

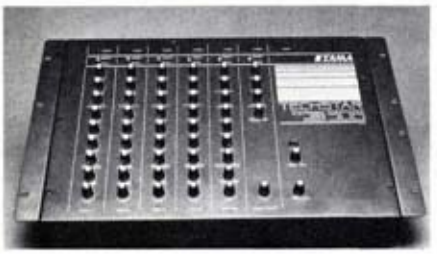
All drumpads connect to the board via a multi-line cable. The snake-type cable has five separate color-coded phono plugs at one end for the pads, and a six-pin plug on the other end for input to the board's single jack. The cymbals, as well, have their own input jack and separate cable. The *Fightman* does not allow for individual outputting or external triggering.

The *Fightman* pads have a realistic feel, since they use genuine heads and hoops. The snare is capable of tight or loose sounds, and does manage lo sound pretty authentic. Of all the toms, my favorite is the floor tom. While the other two toms have a bit of "boing" to them, the floor tom has nice depth with the right amount of downward pitch bend, giving a very forceful sound. The bass drum is thumpy at times, but still comes close to an acoustic drum. The ride and crash cymbals leave something to be desired; an analog reproduction of a shimmering cymbal is difficult to do, anyway. They have a buzzy, pitched tone, and can become annoying after a while. The hi-hat, though, had a good "chip" sound, and was not as harsh-sounding as the others when the cymbals are opened. Sustain of the top hi-hat can be adjusted at the control board for tight or loose sounds.

Since the controls on the board are limited, you can really only go with what Pearl has given you, being able only to change pitch on the drums, and decay rale on both the drums and cymbals. The sensitiviiy controls work dynamically, but the drums do not drop pitch when played softly, as real drums do—only their volume changes, depending upon force of impact.

Pearl's *Fightman* is great for home practice without bothering the neighbors, and may even have a place in certain live and studio applications. If properly EQ'd, it can come mighty close to a real acoustic drum sound. Its sound is quite different from units like the Simmons, and it is a good alternative, as well as a nice, audible practice kit. The basic five-pad *Fightman* retails at $899.00. The complete setup with cymbals (no cymbal stands or pedals) retails at $1,169.00. A separate bass drum pad is available for double-bass use.

Tama Techstar



Another major drum company getting into electronic drumkits is Tama, with their *Techstar TS*500 and TS600 units. The *TS500* is a five-piece drumkit setup; the *TS600* is basically a percussion "add-on" kit using six mountable pads, but no bass drum.

Both setups employ six-sided, hard plastic-shelled pads, each with a round center. This round center is actually a real black-film drumhead, fitted over a foam-isolated plate. The head is tensionable and replaceable via a standard drumkey, and provides for a real drum "feel."

The free-standing bass drum pad with the *TS500* does not use a drumhead for its striking surface, but instead, a round raised foam disc. At the bottom of the pad is a large plate for pedal mounting, which also has adjustable spike spurs for stabilization. The main spurs on the pad are two individual large steel tubular legs with spike tips, which locate into side-mounted clamp brackets. The pad is edged off with aluminum and has a large Tama logo screened on its front.

The snare pad on the TS500 is unique in that it offers both a snare drum sound plus a rimshot sound. On the edge of the pad body, Tama has fitted a curved block of high-impact plastic to be used as a separate rimshot trigger. This trigger block can be used in conjunction with the regular snare sound, or, independently. To accomplish this, the pad has two 1/4" jacks.

All the other pads have one 1/4" jack each. The jacks are located on the side of the pads near their mount brackets, except for the bass drum, whose jack is placed near the bottom corner of its back side. Individual color-coded cables are supplied to connect each pad to the central brain.

The *Techstar* pads use mount brackets consisting of a hinge clamp with a diamond-shaped opening. These brackets will fit onto L-arm type holders, using a wing bolt to secure the pad clamp. Strangely enough, the snare pad has no mount bracket, but will fit comfortably on any basket design snare stand.

The TS500 and TS600 differ not only in their pad configurations, but in their control boards as well. The *TS305* brain (packaged with the *TS500)* is rack-mountable, as is the *TS600's TS306* brain, and has separate channels for snare, bass, tom 1, 2, 3, and rimshot. Each channel has rotary controls for adjustment of level, pitch, decay, attack, pitch bend, sensitivity, noise brightness, and noise/tone balance. There is also a special control at each channel labeled "Emphasis," which adds on some bottom end for a fuller sound. The noise brightness control is not present on the rimshot channel, since the tone level and noise level are split into separate dials. Sensitivity controls both dynamics and pitch of the pads; a softer hit produces a lower pitch, as well as decreased volume.

The *Techstar* kits offer a choice of two sounds per channel: one internal factory pre-set, and one manual sound, which is controllable by the user. These sounds are selectable via a tiny toggle switch near the top of each channel row. Unfortunately, there is no facility for instant switching of all channels simultaneously (like with the Simmons *SDS8 [MD,* Dec. '84]). Each channel also has an LED which flashes when its particular pad is struck.

Completing the array of dials on the face of the board is a stereo headphone jack with level control, plus a control for line input level. There is no master volume control; perhaps Tama will see fit to include one next time. The rear of the board has individual pad inputs and outputs (all 1/4" jacks), as well as a master output XLR jack, plus left and right stereo outputs (1/4" jacks) which are pre-panned. There are also left and right line-in jacks, and each channel has its own external trigger input.

The *TS500* has an enjoyable sound. Its presets are very comparable to the old Simmons *SDS5* kit, perhaps a bit fatter. The tom-tom sounds have a solid impact and good presence, with a tiny bit of noise mixed in the background. Though some may like the bass drum the way it is, I feel it could perhaps use more attack in its preset to match the other drums. The factory snare setting sounds a bit too much like a tom, so I would personally go for setting up my own sound. At first, the rimshot block is a strange thing to get used to, but it clearly gives a different, fatter snare sound. Using it alone or in conjunction with the snare pad gives some interesting sounds. The control dials allow the player to produce "custom" sounds, and 1 was able to get many likable drum sounds, as well as tuned and "Syndrum-type" electronic sounds. It should be noted that, while on memory (factory) setting, only the sensitivity, level and emphasis controls are operable.

The TS600 uses six pads, all with mounting brackets. Its board has individual channels for toms 1, 2, 3, 4, synth, and handclaps. The controls for the four toms are the same as the TS500 setup. "Synth" channel controls are for: level, sensitivity, tuning, decay, modulation, tone bend, noise bend, noise/tone balance, and triangle wave/square wave. The handclap controls are: level, sensitivity, brightness, reverb level and reverb decay. All other controls and input and outputs are identical to the *TS5OO's* brain, and all channels also have the memory/manual selector switch.

The tom-tom presets on the *TS306* brain are the same as the 75305, and the channels can be manually controlled throughout the same parameters. The preset for the synth channel is a quick, upward modulation *a la* Syndrum. Using the dials manually can create some wild percussive sounds—thunder, pitched tones, sweeps, etc. Tama's handclaps have quite a good tuning range enabling loose or sharp claps. For an analog sound, they sound pretty realistic.

Tama's *Techstar* is an impressive contender in the electronic kit market, and like all other Tama products, is well constructed. The pads are available with white or black shells. Either setup, without stands, retails at $1,299.00.